

The Journal of Educational Issue of Language Minority Students, V. 15, Winter 1995. Boise State University.

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# Success of Hispanic College Students on a Writing Examination

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Persons of Hispanic origin are one of the fastest growing population groups in the United States. Recent Bureau of Census statistics reported in the World Almanac (1992) and the Statistical Abstract of the United States (Bureau of Census, 1993) show that the Hispanic population increased from 14.5 million in 1980 to 22.3 million in 1990, an increase of 53%. This population growth outstripped the projected 21 million in 1990. In addition, an accelerated growth rate is anticipated (Fradd, Figueroa, & Correa, 1989), and predictions indicate that by the year 2000, the Hispanic population will reach 29 million (Valdivieso & Davis, 1988).

The Hispanic population faces many problems; however, education is consistently cited as one of the major obstacles oppressing Hispanics. Their educational achievement has always been reported as lagging behind that of Anglos (Lee, 1987; Ortiz, 1989; Reyes, 1992; Bureau of Census, 1993). Numerous factors are related to Hispanics' lack of academic achievement; among them is the lack of support by teachers and administrators. Gonzales (1993) found that many teachers and administrators believe Hispanic parents do not care, that Hispanic students are unmotivated, and that they, as teachers and administrators, need not require much from the students or from themselves. Interactions stemming from these beliefs and expectations cause ethnic minority students and their parents to withdraw mentally from academic efforts (Cummins, 1989). Negative attitudes towards Hispanics (Laosa, 1977; Ramirez, 1981) and the status given them (Ryan & Carranza, 1975) by educators may be at the base of the overrepresentation of Hispanics in special education (Chinn & Hughes, 1987; Collier, 1986, 1987; Mercer, 1973) and their underrepresentation in gifted and talented classes (Chinn & Hughes, 1987; de Bernard, 1985; Kozol, 1992; Mercer, 1973; Richert, 1987; Woods & Achey, 1990). Labeling Hispanic students as "disabled" impedes them from acquiring a quality education (Torres, 1991).

Adding to this enigma is that about 90% of Hispanic students attend urban schools that typically have a limited tax base, which in turn translates into a low level of education provided these students (National Council, 1992), which in turn results in horrendous dropout rates among Hispanics (Bureau of Census, 1993). Shorris (1992) estimated that of Hispanic students enrolled in kindergarten in any given year, not even 30% would graduate from high school. Similar statistics reported by Ortiz (1989) indicate that the likelihood of Hispanics dropping out of high school is more than double that for Anglo students.

## **Hispanic Enrollment in Postsecondary Education Institutions**

Hispanics who survive until their senior year in high school have, no doubt, overcome many odds. For many of these young adults, high school marks an end to an ordeal; for others, high school graduation is the highest educational goal anticipated; and for a few, high school graduation is a stepping stone toward more education. For Hispanics who pursue post-secondary education, Leon and McNeill (1986) found that parents were the most influential factor in their decision to attend college followed by high school counselors and high school teachers. However, the most crucial factor that impedes the continuation of education for Hispanics is lack of financial support from parents or from scholarship sources (Mendosa, Bergeman, Mackowski, & Condi, 1994; Peer, 1981).

Neither community colleges (Nora, 1987) nor four-year institutions have been successful in recruiting and retaining Hispanic students. In 1986, Hispanics made up only 3.6% of the undergraduate population at four-year institutions and 4.4% in the fall of 1991 (Evangelauf, 1993). Hispanics obtained only 2.7% of the bachelor's degrees awarded in 1987 (Astone & Wormack, 1990; Carter & Wilson, 1991; National Center, 1992), 2.7% of the bachelor's degrees in 1990, but only 2.1% of the bachelor's degrees in 1991 (Stewart, 1993).

Factors that affect retention rates of Hispanic college students include being targets of racism (Ehrlich, 1990), facing negative attitudes of faculty, especially those in senior colleges and research institutions (Peer, 1981), and receiving inappropriate instruction due to the faculty's lack of understanding or preparation to teach them (Reyes, 1992). Some of the retention problems center around cultural factors, while others seem to be family and job related. For example, Hispanic students may be caught in a cultural dilemma which may affect decisions to continue their college education. Hispanic parents and students have been found to agree more strongly than Anglo-American parents and students that students should comply with authority and acquiesce to authority in school (Buenning & Tollefson, 1987). Thus, Hispanic students, with their parents' blessings, may opt to withdraw instead of developing an assertive posture in resolving conflicts and challenges encountered in college. Finally, many Hispanic students have to drop out to meet job and family responsibilities.

## **Language as a Factor in Hispanic Students' Achievement**

Language variables are believed to be major determinants of academic achievement. For Hispanic students, however, much attention has been given to the role that language interference plays in their education. Cronnell (1985) and Rizzo and Villafane (1975) believe that Spanish is an impediment to Hispanic students' academic achievement while Smith (1992) posits that linguistic and social differences lead to mixed signals for both students and their teachers. Fernandez and Nielsen (1986) state that Spanish negatively affects academic achievement due to code switching or the role language plays as a cultural marker, i.e., the focus of teachers' negative attitudes toward Hispanic students. Teachers harbor negative attitudes toward Hispanic students' accented English, use of a nonstandard variety of English, or use of nonstandard Spanish (Laosa, 1977; Ramirez, 1981) and judge them to have less social status than speakers of standard English (Ryan & Carranza, 1975).

Not all professionals believe that Spanish language affects academic achievement of Hispanic students. Cummins (1984) suggests that verbal ability underlying academic language proficiency in one language can be generalized to another language. In her study Ortiz (1989) found that Hispanics' bilingualism was not related to low literacy skills. Pennock-Roman's (1990) study of Hispanics' SAT and language proficiency at

six major universities found that the effect of language background on students' SAT scores and freshman academic achievement varied by institution. At institutions of higher education (IHE) in Texas and Massachusetts, Hispanic students with higher levels of Spanish proficiency had better freshman grades than Spanish proficient students in California and Florida IHEs. Pennock-Roman attributed these differences to the acceptance and support received by Hispanic students at their respective institutions.

Buriel and Cardoza (1988) reported that Spanish language effects on achievement were minimal, especially in third-generation Mexican Americans. In fact, students with Spanish literacy have been found to have higher reading scores, a variable found to be prerequisite to writing skills (Rivera, 1984).

### **The Challenge of Writing for Hispanic Students**

The social significance of writing has become increasingly important at all levels of education (White & Thomas, 1981). Demonstration of writing ability is part of minimum competency exams in the elementary grades, is an exit criterion for high school graduation, is used as a criterion for college level course placement, and, in the case of the present study, is a graduation requirement from college.

The emphasis on writing may be due, in part, to the impact of studies on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (N.A.E.P., 1985). In separate studies using the National Assessment of Educational Progress, Owen (1991) and Lee (1987) found that the average performance in writing was unchanged from 1984 to 1990 for fourth and eleventh graders. For eighth graders, average writing performance in 1990 was lower than in 1984. A disproportionate number of Black and Hispanic students in the fourth, eighth, and eleventh grades were found to write less well than their Anglo classmates.

Writing problems experienced by Hispanics may be due to a multiplicity of factors. But, Hispanic students, like their Anglo peers, use knowledge based on experiences with the world, with language, and with the norm of their culture when they engage in writing activities (Purves & Purves, 1986). However, many Hispanics struggle to learn in school due to the transitional process between sets of sounds (phonemes) and the printed symbol (graphemes) (Duran, 1983) and in linking the ideas in English texts to their conceptual knowledge (Alvarez, 1990). In the learning process, native Spanish-speaking students must come to grips with the structure of Spanish versus that of English. For example, the English language is much more linear in structure than Spanish. English uses logic and precision, clarity and brevity, while Spanish, like other romance languages, places the emphasis on the style and beauty of the language and its presentation (Smith, 1992). This means that Hispanic writers who are proficient in Spanish and who are influenced by their culture must cognitively exchange style and beauty of language for logic, precision, clarity, and brevity and apply it to their writing—a formidable task, indeed.

According to Castilleja (1987) and Reyes (1992), some Hispanic students' poor writing ability is attributable to a lack of opportunity to learn writing skills. Writing for some Hispanics becomes, not a task of communicating ideas or relating information but, a self-regulating activity. In fact, an ordinarily simple writing task in a student's native language becomes an extremely cognitively demanding chore in the second language when it exceeds the student's current English language skills.

The question, then, becomes whether or not Hispanic students' writing in English will show the effects of the Spanish language or their cultural norms. Results of studies with college level Hispanics do not provide clear evidence that Spanish language or culture interferes with the writing task. Amastae (1981) reports that Spanish influences are rarely detected among bilingual Hispanic students who attend college. This may be because only successful students apply. Carlson (1988) found that Anglo students had more instances in

which diction and confused homophones or word pairs were problematic than did their Hispanic and Chinese peers. Carlson attributed these differences to the possibility that Anglos used more risk taking behavior in writing due to their proficiency and comfort with English. Hispanics were reported as having used "safe" syntax and vocabulary in their writing. Penfield (1981), on the other hand, suggests that Hispanic college students' source of difficulty in writing English is due, in part, to dialect background, in part, due to lack of familiarity with the English writing system, and, in part, due to contact with Spanish which is manifested in interference.

The present investigation focused on the results of a university-wide junior level writing competency examination as it affects Hispanics. Specifically, the purpose of the descriptive study was to compare the writing ability and success rates of third and/or fourth year male and female undergraduate Hispanic and Anglo college students on a holistically scored writing examination. Four research questions guided the objectives of the study:

1. Are there ethnic differences in writing quality as indicated by Junior Level Essay mean scores?
2. Are there gender differences in writing quality as indicated by Junior Level Essay mean scores?
3. Are there pass/fail differences between gender groups?
4. Are there pass/fail differences between ethnic groups?

## Method

### *Participants*

Subjects in this investigation were male and female junior and senior undergraduates attending a university with a regional mission to serve residents within a 100 mile radius of its campus. The university has a culturally diverse student enrollment of approximately 8,000 students; undergraduate enrollment is about 4,500 students. A large number of nontraditional, first generation, and underprepared students attend the university.

Subjects in the study included students who had taken the Junior Level Essay (JLE) examination between the Spring of 1987 and Summer of 1993 semesters. The Hispanic group consisted of 144 subjects (64 males, 80 females), and the Anglo group consisted of 5366 (2399 males, 2967 females) subjects.

All students eligible for the JLE were notified by mail about the JLE procedures to take the examination. Students were permitted to use dictionaries and thesauruses to write their essays in an allotted two hour time period. Candidates wrote on a predetermined topic that elicited a personal narrative essay. The *focus* of topics changed from one administration to the next; types of topics remained the same.

Essays were scored holistically by a multidisciplinary panel of judges drawn from the university faculty. All judges were trained to rate essays holistically prior to the scoring of student papers. To establish the criteria for rating essays, four protocol papers per topic were drawn by the JLE staff from the essay pool. Essays written by students with learning disabilities and international students whose native language was other than English were not used as protocol papers; Hispanic students' essays remained in the pool. Modifications of scoring procedures described by Hogan and Mishler (1979) were used in the training/scoring process. These procedures, described in Elliot, Plata, and Zelhart (1990), used a six-level scale. For the purpose of selecting training papers, levels 5 and 6 were combined to form a "high" writing competency category; levels 3 and 4 formed the "medium" competency category; and levels 1 and 2 formed the "low" competency category plus a fourth paper representing one of the three competency categories. The fourth paper prevented raters from anticipating the score value of any paper at any competency

category.

Procedurally, two judges rated each essay independently based on writing proficiency criteria established by university faculty (See Table 1). Judges were instructed to award each essay a score that best characterized the level of writing proficiency, using the guidelines during their evaluations of essays. Judges' scores that were three or more score points apart were considered discrepant, and the papers were then read by a third judge. The final score for discrepant essays was determined by adding the two highest scores. For nondiscrepant papers, the combined scores of the two judges were taken as the essay's score. Thus, final scores ranged from 0-12 with a score of 7 set as minimum passing criteria. Interrater agreement of 95% or better has been obtained for twenty seven JLE administrations, beginning with the 1984 fall semester when holistic scoring was begun.

*Table 1. General Characteristics of Junior Level Essays by Level*

### **Level 6**

- € Very well organized, often carefully reasoned
- € Very good sense of unity
- € Frequent sentence variation
- € Good word choice that may be unusually striking, vivid, or creative
- € Virtually free of grammatical or mechanical errors

### **Level 5**

- € Well organized
- € Good sense of unity
- € Frequent sentence variation
- € Word choice that may be vivid or striking
- € Few, if any, grammatical or mechanical errors

### **Level 4**

- € Paper is organized, although it may be weak in logic, example, or unity
- € Sense of unity, although transitions may be lacking
- € Some sentence variation
- € Appropriate word choice for college level writing, although word choice may sometimes be elementary
- € Some errors in grammar and mechanics, but errors do not necessarily distract the reader from the continuity of the paper

### **Level 3**

- € Paper attempts to organize the topic but fails due to such errors as faulty logic, lack of precise examples, or superfluous ideas
- € Little sense of unity
- € Some sentence variation
- € Repetitious or poor word choice
- € Errors in grammar and mechanics distract the reader from the content and continuity of the paper

## Level 2

- € Paper attempts to develop topic but fails due to such errors as faulty logic, lack of precise examples, or superfluous ideas
- € Very little sense of unity
- € Little or no sentence variation
- € Repetitious or poor word choice
- € Numerous errors in grammar and mechanics

## Level 1

- € Lack of topic development; lack of logical organization; lacks examples.

- € Lack of unity
- € Little or no sentence variation
- € Repetitious or poor word choice
- € Numerous errors in grammar and mechanics

## Results

To answer the first two questions about the quality of writing between ethnic and gender groups the data were analyzed using a 2 x 2 analysis of variance (ANOVA) with gender and ethnicity as the two independent variables. Results indicated significant mean differences between gender groups ( $F [1,5506] = 202.74, p < .000$ ) and ethnic groups ( $F [1,5506] = 3.82, p < .05$ ). There were no significant interaction effects between gender and ethnicity ( $F [1,5506] = .30, p > .05$ ).

While the analysis of mean differences between groups was taken as being indicative of the quality of the writing, it did not indicate the frequency by which these groups passed or failed the Junior Level Essay. To answer the questions about the relationship between gender and ethnicity and pass/fail status on the JLE,  $X^2$  analyses were performed on the pass/fail frequency distributions found in Table 2. Pass-fail frequency distributions for males and females differed significantly from the expected occurrence,  $X^2(1) = 87.49, p = < .001$ . The pass-fail frequency distribution between ethnic groups did not differ significantly, ( $X^2(1) = 1.43, p > .05$ ), indicating that Hispanic students passed and failed the Junior Level Essay at a similar rate to that of their Anglo peers.

*Table 2. Pass-Fail Frequencies and  $X^2$  Values for Hispanic, Anglo, Male, and Female Groups on the Junior Level Essay Examination*

Classification	Pass	Fail
<i>Hispanic</i>		
Males	50	14
Females	73	7
	Chi Square = 4.93, p. <.05	
<i>Anglo</i>		
Males	2021	378
Females	2735	232

Chi Square = 84.01, p. <.001		
<i>Gender</i>		
Males	2071	393
Females	2808	239
Chi Square = 87.49, p. <.001		
<i>Ethnicity</i>		
Hispanic	123	21
Anglo	4756	610

A study of the X2 cell values resulting from data in Table 2 indicated that the number of students in each classification group who failed the JLE contributed significantly to each of the calculated X2 values. For the Hispanic group the contribution was 85.8%; for the Anglo group the contribution was 88.85%; and for the Gender groups the contribution was 88.55%. Percent contributions were determined by using the calculation method in Siegel and Castellan (1988). The percent contribution of the selected cells to the total X2 value is equal to the sum of the selected cells' X2 values divided by the total X2 value. For example, in the comparison of the gender groups in Table 2, X2 cell values were 5.54, 42.85, 4.48, and 34.62, respectively. Frequencies of students who failed ( $X^2 = 42.85 + X^2 34.62$ ) contributed 88.55% to the total, 87.49, X2 value.

## Discussion

Holistic scores do two things: (a) They show how individuals' writing compares to their peer group's writing, and (b) they reveal how the group writes as a whole (Horner, 1978). Results of the present investigation indicate that, as a group, Hispanic students are successful in college writing, but the quality of their writing, as indicated by the JLE mean scores, is significantly inferior to that of their Anglo peers. Results in the present study on the quality of writing are consistent with the findings by Follman and Anderson (1967) and McArthur (1981) that Hispanic students' essays receive significantly lower scores from Anglo raters. In the present study an excess of 95% of the judges were Anglo.

Differences in the quality of writing between ethnic groups may have been due to the unequal cell frequencies in the study; the number of Anglo students was large in comparison to the number of Hispanic students. Another possible reason for the differences in the quality of writing between ethnic groups may be that Hispanic college students continue to experience writing problems. However, because "a holistic score summarizes an overall, general impression, different features of writing may contribute to the same score for different individuals" (Carlson, 1988, p. 231). Holistic assessment is not diagnostic in nature; thus, the analysis of any type of writing problems Hispanic college students may have experienced could not have been assessed in the present study.

Differences between gender groups is consistent with findings by Elliot, Plata, and Zelhart (1990) that females outscored their male peers on the Junior Level Essay examination. In addition, differences between gender groups may be due to males' negative attitude toward writing (Knudson, 1993).

While there is concern about Hispanic students' quality of writing, the other real concern was whether or not the writing examination was a factor in these students' degree completion. Statistical analysis of the pass/fail

rates of Hispanic and Anglo students indicated that both student groups passed and failed the Junior Level Essay at similar rates.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

While the results of this investigation support the idea that Hispanic students have the potential to achieve academically in a college setting, their writing performance remains inferior to that of Anglo students. Further study should be made on the Hispanic students' writing samples to determine patterns of difficulties that contributed to the lower ratings awarded their essays. Without this important information these students cannot be advised on how to improve their writing skills. Finally, because faculty perform periodic evaluations and monitor students' academic progress, they need to be vigilant about the reliability of their judgments of students' performance (Hogan & Mishler, 1979).

Several questions are left unanswered by this investigation. For example, What are the academic characteristics of Hispanic students who passed and failed the JLE examination? Was the writing prompt one that yielded the level of writing approximating the writing demands Hispanic students face in their college career? Would there be a shift in pass-fail rates among groups if different types of prompts were used to assess writing skills? Would there be an effect on the writing assessment outcomes if Hispanic students' essays were judged by Hispanic faculty?

Replication studies on writing assessment should be conducted in various size colleges and universities to determine the success rate of Hispanic students. In addition, studies should be conducted to answer the proposed questions. We can ill afford the lack of answers to these and other questions in the face of the growing Hispanic population present in our educational system.

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